COLCHESTER BOARD OF EDUCATION
Colchester, CT

EMERGENCY BOARD MEETING

Tuesday, March 15, 2023
4:30 PM
The Commons (Black Box Theater)
William J. Johnston Middle School
360 Norwich Avenue, Colchester

MINUTES

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT: Chair Alexander Oliphant, Vice-Chair Mary Tomasi, Secretary Margo Gignac, Donna Antonacci, Michelle Millington, Christopher Rivers

ADMINISTRATION PRESENT: Superintendent Daniel P. Sullivan, III, Assistant Superintendent Dr. Charles E. Hewes, Bacon Academy Assistant Principal Michael Mal, William J. Johnston Middle School Principal Christopher Bennett, William J. Johnston Assistant Principal Stacy Ewings, Jack Jackter Intermediate School Principal Elise Butson, Jack Jackter Intermediate School Assistant Principal Jennifer Reynolds, Colchester Elementary School Principal Judy O'Meara, Director of Pupil Services and Special Education Amy Emory, Assistant Director of Pupil Services and Special Education Elisa Fabizak

OTHERS PRESENT: Business Director Rachel Linkkila, Accountant Michelle Marceau, SRO Corporal Craig Scheel, Executive Assistant to the Superintendent/Board Clerk Heather Petit, Board of Finance Liaison Michael Egan

1. MEETING OPENING

1.1 Call to Order

Chair Alexander Oliphant called the meeting to order at 4:33 PM

2. *PRIORITY DISCUSSION/ACTION ITEMS

2.1 Demand of the Chair of the Board of Finance Relative to the Degree of the Munis

Chair Alex Oliphant reviewed the criteria for an emergency meeting and read the following statement: "The Freedom of Information Commission and the Connecticut Courts apply the commonly used meaning of the word "emergency" in determining what permits a public agency to conduct an emergency meeting. The Freedom of Information Commission has consistently held that "circumstances which permit an emergency meeting occur only rarely and only when there is no time for a special meeting notice to be posted twenty-four hours in advance.

In this instance, the Board of Education received an email this morning from the Chair of the Board of Finance with a deadline for submission of materials by the end of day tomorrow with the threat of possibly canceling the budget workshop scheduled for Tuesday. Had we waited until Thursday evening to meet, the deadline for submission would have passed before we had the opportunity to make a decision."

Chair Oliphant stated that the Superintendent spoke with legal counsel relative to this criterion. Counsel examined the circumstances and determined that the Board was acting in good faith, especially if the meeting was posted and promoted online.

Chair Oliphant stated for the record, that at 10:24 PM last night (March 14, 2023), Superintendent Sullivan emailed the Board of Finance with a copy to the Board of Education, a 14-page Munis report, an Excel document with budget details, and a definition of every budget code.

Chair Oliphant said at 8:43 AM today, March 15, 2023, the chair of the Board of Finance sent an email in response. Chair Oliphant read the following email into the record.

As BOF Chairman I recognize that the education department has experienced three superintendents this year. Although employees can't be certain, numbers can be. This is why we use the Munis platform for budgeting in our town.

Our towns and schools' financial condition is stable and consistent thanks the impeccable work of our 17-year former CFO who retired last year. In no budgetary year have we ever threatened teachers or programming like you have this year. Even when our state threatened substantial cuts, our BOE didn't not pass the financial woe on to the classroom. In 2017 the state did reduce our income after the budget by $1.2M, and still programming, teachers and taxpayers were not directly impacted. Your inflammatory narrative and scare tactics is a low for our community.

Today, I must insist Rachel enter the budget request into the munis program, exactly as it has been since 2018. She has the last several year budget book details for her reference.

Furthermore, you must also substantiate the Special Education increase of $1.2M. The BOE's failure to provide financial over-site, despite my numbers warnings since June 2022, is a clear act of willful blindness. I reached out to the auditors, attorneys, and other politicians to find that under no circumstances would our town be in a position to absorb this increase without reimbursement despite your claims that our town must bear the full cost. I will await your substantiation.

Once the BOF has proper data we will ensure the funding is appropriate for the schools, which was the work BOE was supposed to accomplish but failed. With the BOF bottom line authority the superintendent and BOE can and will ultimately spend as they chose. If they chose to impact our classrooms it's a choice and a bad one at that.

BOF will need full budget detail by EOD Thursday or risk postponing the next workshop.

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Chair Oliphant asked Business Director, Rachel Linkkila, and Accountant Michelle Marceau to provide the Board with the history of budget presentations in Colchester.

Rachel Linkkila distributed past years' budget reports and stated that in 2017-2018 they moved from Excel spreadsheets to Munis printouts. This was instituted by the Superintendent at that time. Ms. Linkkila said the past CFO, Maggie Cosgrove, did not agree with giving a Munis printout of the budget. Ms. Linkkila stated that the Town has never provided a Munis document for their budget to the Board of Finance.

Ms. Linkkila stated that the information given yesterday to the Board of Finance does give line by line items in Excel format. The same information in the 200 page book format from last year is the same information found on the Board of Education website.

Accountant Michelle Marceau spoke to the budget book history as well. Ms. Marceau reiterated that the past Superintendent from several years ago, Mary Conway, required CFO Maggie Cosgrove to distribute a Munis report for the budget, even against Ms. Cosgrove's better judgment.

Dr. Charles Hewes said that for reference, all past budget books can be found on the Board of Education website.

Discussion was had on reports provided to the community and Board of Finance this budget season. Several board members stated the information given for this budget is far more information than was ever provided previously. Margo Gignac stated that several community members and a Board of Finance member said the Munis budget document was hard to understand.

Michael Egan, Board of Finance liaison to the Board of Education member, stated that at no time did the chair of the Board of Finance ever present her concerns with the full board and the email was not shared with the full board. Mr. Egan said the chair was not authorized to send the email and cannot send an email on behalf of the board without prior authorization. Mr. Egan said many aspects of the email were completely wrong. Mr. Egan said the Board of Finance chair cannot cancel the budget workshop.

Mr. Egan said that in 2018 the Board of Education budget was passed and afterward the town learned of ECS funding cuts. As the budget had already passed, Mr. Egan said the Board of Education could have told the town to have a referendum or take it out of fund balance. However, the Board of Education chose to be cooperative and took a major budget freeze and were able to give the town approximately $800,000.

In a response to a question about the feasibility of providing the budget in two formats, Superintendent Sullivan said it would be an unreasonable expectation for staff to present the budget in two different formats every year. In addition, the Board of Finance moved the budget timeline up 4 weeks this year, giving administration an extremely small window of time.

Donna Antonacci said that by statute the Board has given an itemized budget to the Board of Finance.

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Mr. Rivers said that last year neither board was happy with the process and there was a need for discussion about how the process should move forward. Mr. Rivers and Chair Oliphant requested meetings several times with the Board of Finance chair to no avail. Mr. Rivers said that he heard from many community members who really appreciate the breakdown and volume of information the Board of Education has put out.

Motion Made by: M.Gignac
To move forward with what the Board of Education has provided which meets the legal obligation to the Board of Finance and present those same reports going forward.
Seconded by: M.Millington
Discussion: Superintendent Sullivan encouraged community members to look at the website for all the information provided which includes all budget presentations, adopted line item budget, budget level report, budget codes and explanations, enrollment history and projections, programs funded by grants, roles and responsibilities of staff at central office and the schools, staffing history, tuition revenue, high school athletics budget, average sections and class sizes, estimated ECS formula schedule, district reference group (DRG) comparisons, security assessment, DRG D per pupil and median income, and state mandates.
Roll call: All in favor
Vote: Motion carried

2.2 *To Determine a Response to the Demands of the Chair of the Board of Finance and Associated Accusations Found in the Email

Chair Oliphant asked the Board how they would like to respond to the remarks made in the email by Board of Finance Chair Andrea Migliaccio.

Superintendent Sullivan stated he did not lead with a threat in regard to reduction of positions. There was a question that was asked by a citizen of what potential cuts might look like if the Board of Finance cut the Board 5%. Superintendent Sullivan said he answered factually and that he would have to work with the Board on where any cuts might come from. The Superintendent also gave the Board a heads up that Channel 3 News reached out to Superintendent Sullivan in regard to the budget.

Dr. Hewes spoke in regard to a history of proposed cuts to positions in the District. Dr. Hewes said there have been staff reductions in the past and also proposed staff reductions in previous budgets. Dr. Hewes said numbers are analyzed to put forward the best budget for the needs of our kids. Historically, reductions when reductions were made they reduced morale due to stating exact positions that may be eliminated without any conversations with the affected staff. In direct response to some of the allegations in the Board of Finance chair's email, he has many concerns about how that was articulated and misconstrued.

Ms. Millington expressed concern that the Board of Finance chair was asking for special education information in her email that might breach student confidentiality if provided. The chair of the Board of Finance stated in her email that she spoke to attorneys, politicians and others and all placements are eligible for reimbursement; however, Director of Pupil Services and Special Education Amy Emory said that is not the case and will provide documents in regard to this without any identifiable student information.

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Mary Tomasi stated that the Board provided all of the legally required documents and that the Board should attend the Board of Finance workshop as planned. Ms. Tomasi stated that community members can ask questions from the Board of Education and the Board of Finance.

Mr. Rivers said the Board should also state that it is completely inappropriate of the Board of Finance chair to attack our staffs' character.

Motion by: C. Rivers
To authorize Alex Oliphant, Margo Giganc, and Donna Antonacci to craft a letter in response to the chair of the Board of Finance with the understanding that if any board member has a desire to discuss or modify the letter, a special meeting will be held to do so.
Second: D. Antonacci
Roll Call: All in favor
Vote: Motion carried

3. ADJOURNMENT

Motion by: M.Gignac
To adjourn the meeting at 5:49 PM
Second: C. Rivers
Roll Call: All in favor
Vote: Motion carried

Respectfully submitted,

Heather R. Petit
Executive Assistant to the Superintendent/Board Clerk

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